

Conference Abstract

Enhancing Networking and Linking Communities for the Conservation Practices of Natural History Collections

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Abstract

The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake revealed that one of the reasons for the lack of effective and timely action to rescue and restore natural history collections is that the organizational laws and policies are insufficient and inapplicable under extreme circumstances. Laws and policies for collections are primarily concerned with designation and registration, preservation and management, financial assistance, government involvement and public awareness. The Cultural Property Protection System and the Act on Cultural Properties Preservation prioritized the rescue and restoration of cultural assets, both nationally and regionally, however, attention to the state of natural history collections was delayed and was primarily fueled by volunteers (Mawatari 2015).

Earlier in the Meiji era (1868~1912), national emphasis on cultural assets, represented by Japanese art, contributed to the formation and spread of nationalism (Kanayama 2011). Consequently, the laws and policies in question were enacted, focusing on attaching importance to and preservation of cultural assets. After a few attempts at national discussion on whether science specimens (in natural history collections) should be covered by the law, the problem remain unsolved. In the few cases, where natural history collections were designated by the law, the focus tended to be centered on the value to humanity. It is clear from the laws and policies that decision-makers lack an

understanding of the importance of natural history collections. Further narrowing down the scope, operational rules and regulations are often based on the handling and practices of cultural history objects within the public museums, and descriptions of natural history collections are lacking in many practice guidelines for museums and textbooks on museum studies.

Other than the need for better law and policy, the 2011 disaster has also left curators of natural history collections with a renewed sense of the importance of establishing theories on conservation science and other practice standards for natural history collections through networking and cooperation, not only under extreme circumstances but also for daily management and practical utility. However, the current lack of curators with expertise in natural history collections, the few chances to participate in skill-share programs, and insufficient financial and official support for pioneering research, remain challenging. To address this, it may be possible to propose methodologies and gather individuals with similar interests to deepen the debate on the importance of research and establishment of standards to give curators more chances, support and recognition to carry on conservation science research. Therefore, increasing connections within the natural history museum community is a feasible step to take in the near term. There are some actions in progress such as cross-museum collaboration to establish research projects and the skill-share projects organized by the Natural History Museum Network of Western Japan.

What about the non-natural history museums and natural history collections with few or without specialized curators? The natural history curator community in Japan is small. In 2020, there were 228 museums in Japan holding biological specimens (geological and paleontology specimens were not counted in the research), fewer than half of which were assigned to natural history curators. In the natural history museums, the average number of natural history curators was 2.49; that of science museums, history museums and regional museums was less than 1, indicating that the natural history curator community is a minority in the museum sector of Japan (Fig. 1, Japanese Association of Museums 1986). Even those where there were assignments of natural history curators, the curators' specialized field may not be a perfect match with the collections, ending up with cases such as a curator of entomology having to take care of botanical specimens.

In some regions, in 2020, there were only one or two natural history curators, indicating the unevenness in curator assignments across regions of Japan (Fig. 2, Japanese Association of Museums 1986). This makes it even harder to find other curators who can help when encountering problems beyond one's expertise. All of this underlines the importance of creating a strong national network of natural history museum curators to share experiences, expertise, methodologies, and standards of care.

Keywords

collection, curator, natural history museum, public policy

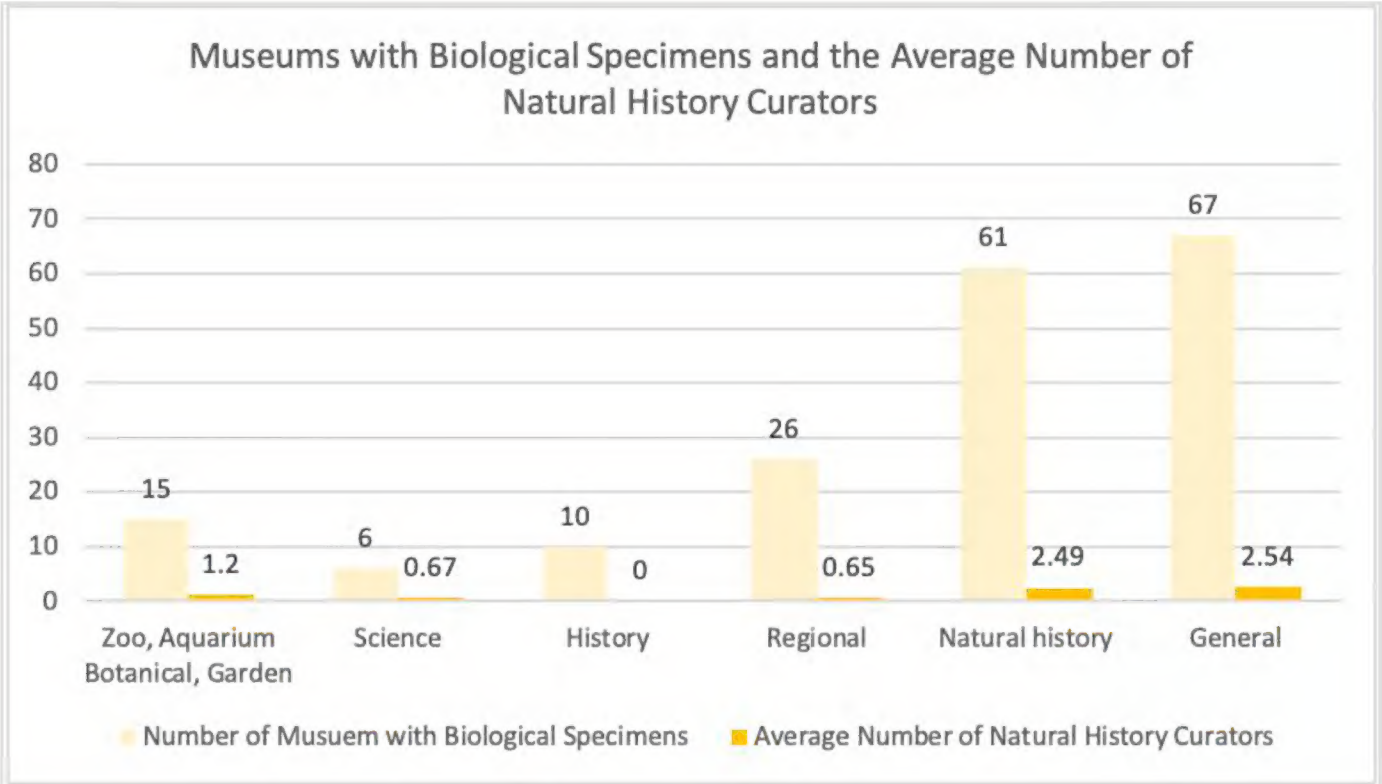


Figure 1.
Museums with biological specimens and the average number of natural history curators

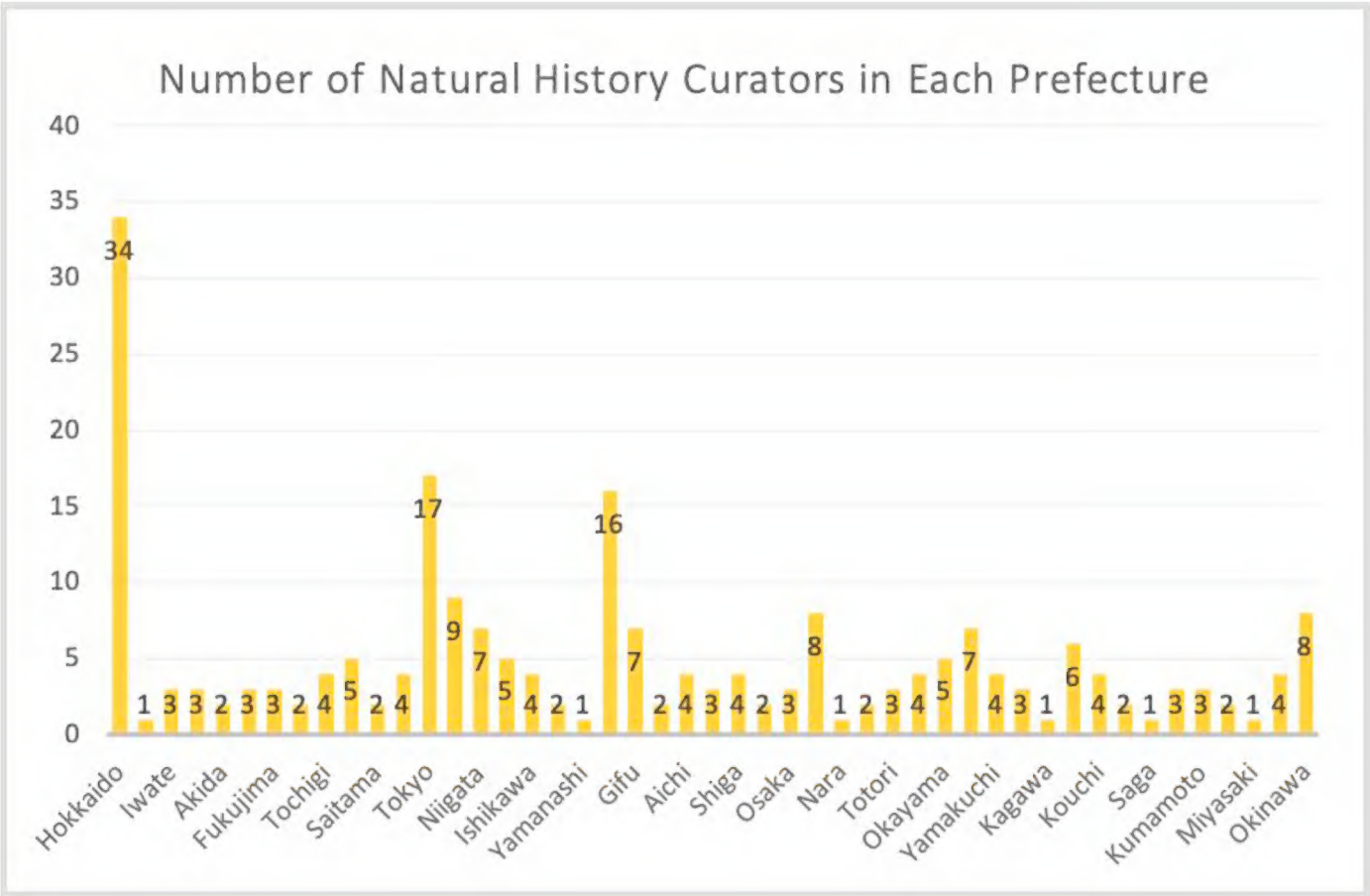


Figure 2.
The number of natural history curators in each prefecture of Japan.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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